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12

Participatory learning and action requires good facilitators - who aren't always around

Andrew Hobbs and Mary Simasiku

· 'Good enough' participatory learning

We believe strongly in the value of new participatory research methods as a way of stimulating high-quality learning of facts and skills, and awareness of new attitudes to improve people's sexual health. Such methods would include mapping, ranking and scoring, 'problem trees', transect walks, time-lines, daily and seasonal schedules, pie-charts, flow charts and Venn diagrams. However, many of these methods require good facilitation, which is not always available.

But if we could put the skills and experience of a good facilitator down on paper (in a book) in an easy-to-understand way, then many more people would be able to facilitate participatory activities. This was our approach to the problem. We accept that a lower level of facilitation skills may reduce the quality of the learning that takes place, but the big advantage is that it greatly increases the quantity of learning. All that is needed is a group, a literate person with the confidence to speak in front of the group, and the book. The quality of learning will be higher if the facilitator has had some training, but even without training, it will be 'good enough'.

The request: a sexual health training pack for use with non-literate young people

This request came from a US NGO, Project Concern International (Zambia). They had part-funded a book of 50 participatory learning activities on sexual health for young people, produced by a Zambian NGO, the Family Health Trust. The book, 'Happy, Healthy & Safe', was targeted at school-going children and youth from ten years upwards. What made it unique was that it was designed to be used by young facilitators rather than adults, with easy-to-follow instructions (scripts, almost) requiring minimal training or facilitation skills. This approach allowed facilitators as young as 12 to lead groups of their peers in activities such as role-play, games and discussions, after an hour's preparation with an adult (older teenagers and trained peer educators needed no coaching at all).

Project Concern saw the need for a similar peer trainer's book that could be used with out-of-school youth possessing little or no literacy. At the same time, the Lusaka Interfaith HIV/AIDS Networking Group, who were working with Project Concern, identified the need for educational materials suitable for religious youth.

So in May 1998, Andrew Hobbs, one of the authors of 'Happy, Healthy & Safe', was contracted for two months to produce a training resource suitable for low-literacy groups of youth attached to religious organisations.

· Participatory research, the ideal approach (or so we thought)

The use of participatory research and the related tools seemed ideal: a participatory, empowering philosophy, a body of techniques that required no literacy, and a track record of use in sexual health promotion. 'Stepping Stones' is the obvious example, with its mix of drama and 'new' participatory methods, as well as participatory needs assessments of

sexual and reproductive health by CARE Zambia.

But even such approaches as these required too high a level of facilitation skills for the group with whom we were working. The plan was to gather a team of young people who led youth groups at their places of worship and train them in participatory research techniques. Then, together, we would develop and trial a sequence of learning activities and write them down in an easy-to-use trainer's manual.

Andrew Hobbs recruited three other facilitators: Mary Simasiku from CARE, an experienced practitioner of participatory methods; Richard Mambwe, a talented young writer and researcher, and Holo Hachonda, knowledgeable in HIV prevention training with religious youth groups.

The young people themselves comprised three young women and seven young men (two Muslim, eight Christian) aged 18-23, who were recruited mainly from youth groups linked to the Interfaith network. Exceptionally talented and committed, they worked on the programme one or two days a week for expenses only, even during the World Cup!

We began with three days of non-residential training. The aims of this induction were to enable participants to:

- explain the basic facts of sexual health;
- challenge attitudes and beliefs that can lead to poor sexual health;
- explain what their religion teaches about relationships, sex, health and self-esteem;
- agree the topics to be included in the learning pack;
- facilitate participatory activities;
- conduct basic research using participatory techniques; and,
- pre-test and evaluate participatory learning activities.

The first half of the programme concentrated on information about sexual health, plus religious attitudes to sexual health and HIV (including a gender awareness session from a Zambian nun who runs a women's refuge). The second half looked at different ways of raising these issues and preventing HIV with religious youth groups, looking at the use of participatory methods in particular.

Mary Simasiku introduced a range of methods including problem trees (flow charts), unfinished drama sketches, picture codes, mapping, seasonal and daily calendars, Venn diagrams, ranking and scoring.

The induction programme was somewhat over-ambitious, but succeeded in setting a friendly, informal and tolerant atmosphere and establishing the basis of participatory research.

Together we decided the topics to be covered in the manual:

- values;
- recognising risk;
- communication skills;
- positive and negative peer pressure;
- sexual relationships;
- biological facts, where to get help;
- how to talk to parents; and,
- how to live positively with HIV.

After the induction, participants were asked to go back to their youth groups and conduct a simple piece of participatory research, using techniques such as mapping, problem trees and focus groups. This allowed them to practise the techniques and provided information about the target group of the learning pack. They returned the following week with maps, diagrams and discussion notes which confirmed the group's choice of topics for inclusion in the manual and the suitability of participatory methods.

How we wrote the book: a cycle of action and reflection

We met for each Thursday every week for the next seven weeks. Richard and Andrew would draft instructions for two to three participatory activities, sometimes drawing on their own experience and sometimes adapting learning activities from other books. The young people used the instructions to lead us all in the activity, then we reviewed the activity and instructions, and developed their facilitation skills through coaching. We tried to make the Thursdays fun for the participants.

Before the following Thursday, the young people went back to their own youth groups and facilitated the same activities. When we met again, each person reported how last week's activity had gone at their church or mosque and suggested improvements, before moving on to the current week's activities.
During the time between Thursdays, Richard and Andrew researched and wrote the background biology and theology for each activity, and Andrew re-drafted previous instructions. Twice during this period we met religious leaders from the Interfaith group and went through drafts together. Their response was encouraging. These review meetings probably helped to allay the leaders' fears and build their confidence in what the young people were producing, to the extent that they approved material which presented condoms in a positive light, which was previously unheard of in religious approaches to sexual health promotion.

As the Thursdays hurtled by, something peculiar started to happen. Instead of the young people using activities devised by Richard and Andrew, they began to devise their own. For example, on how to talk to parents about boyfriends and girlfriends, they came up with two possibilities, which we reviewed together before choosing the best. This was a two-minute unfinished sketch of a mother outraged by her daughter asking a question about pregnancy. There were suggested discussion questions, a role-play to practice broaching difficult subjects with parents, and a final discussion. It was as good as anything in a modern training manual.

The team also became able and confident facilitators. They contributed to the background information, helped to brief an illustrator, planned and starred in the book's photographs, and chose the title ('Treasuring The Gift: How to handle God's gift of sex'). During the last session we discussed how the book could be disseminated - they were impatient to get out there and show other young people their book.

Three months after the Interfaith group gave the go-ahead, they were presented with a 142-page photocopiable draft, containing 18 learning sessions supported by 47 pages of background information. The book's message was that the religious 'Plan A' of 'no sex without marriage' can be good for sexual health, but we also need a 'Plan B' of harm minimisation.

The book's methodology: drama, rather than mapping, diagramming, ranking, scoring or calendars

Together we devised and adapted more than 30 participatory learning sessions. The 18 that we selected to go in the book are overwhelmingly drama-based, in which groups are asked to watch unfinished, open-ended drama sketches, to devise sketches themselves, or to role-play difficult situations. The drama stimulated discussion, and the role-playing allowed practice of skills (see Figure 1). The 18 sessions were combinations of 21 drama-based activities and 18 non-drama activities.

The non-drama activities include short bursts of teaching (e.g. about HIV infection and prevention, sexually transmitted diseases and religious teachings), problem trees, brainstorming, games, drawing, a picture code, quizzes, hot-seating and a ranking exercise. In hot-seating, one person takes on a role, sits in the hot-seat and is questioned by the rest of the group. They improvise their answers, based on their idea for the character, so gradually, through the questions and answers, a picture of the character and their behaviour are built up.

We had not planned it this way. The drama and role-playing won out because drama is very popular in Zambia as a pastime, as an educational method and as entertainment. Therefore the young facilitators were more confident with drama than with other methods, and needed less coaching in how to facilitate it. But unfamiliarity was not the only reason for using fewer 'new' participatory methods, such as problem trees and ranking and scoring. Our final product had to be a book that could be used by facilitators with little or no training in participatory methods, in meetings where no more than two hours would be devoted to the activities, and that seemed to rule out all but the simplest methods. Let us say that the essence of participatory research is to let the group's concerns set the agenda, with the facilitator suggesting the most appropriate tool for the task in hand. If the group needs to

listen to its quieter voices, there are suitable activities; if it needs to become aware of the varying needs and beliefs within the group, again there are tools, and so on with observation, analysis, decision-making and planning.

In this situation, a facilitator needs to have the confidence to 'go with the flow', without knowing what he or she might be called upon to do in an hour's time. The facilitator needs experience of a wide repertoire of activities, the creativity to invent some new ones, the judgement to choose the right activity at the right moment, plus all the usual group facilitation skills. None of this comes quickly or easily. By the end of the two months, our team of young facilitators were capable of such facilitation, but by then we had run out of time, because we had run out of money.

The strength of the approach of 'Treasuring The Gift' is that a facilitator only has to read the instructions aloud, and things happen. The book is very easy to use, the instructions are simple and a young person with only a few days' training can use it successfully. Indeed, during pre-testing, some young people who were not part of the programme and had had no training at all, used the book to lead groups. The strength of good participatory facilitation, its creative, improvisational quality, can't be written down, and we needed something that could be written down.

Figure 1. Three of the 'Treasuring the Gift' development team – Richard Mambwe, Mizzeck Banda and Albert Canteen, in a role play about negative peer pressure [Photo: A. Hobbs]

· Conclusion

We could have approached our challenge in other ways, and there are no short cuts to success. Our solution was a compromise. There is a danger that entrusting facilitation to young people with a low level of skill and experience can do more harm than good. We hope that evaluation will assess this risk, but the pre-testing that was part of the book's development showed no sign of any harm.

We have written this article as the opening of a conversation. We would like to hear what others think about the following questions.

- How important is good facilitation for good participatory research?
- Can we put good facilitation down on paper without killing it?
- What can we do about the shortage of good facilitators?
- What experiences are there of unskilled facilitation doing more harm than good?
- What are young people's experiences of facilitating participatory research?

- **Andrew Hobbs,** 20 Broadgate, Preston PR1 8DX Lancashire, UK. Email: andhobbs@btinternet.com and **Mary Simasiku,** CARE Zambia, P.O. Box 36238, Plot 3020, Musi-O-Tunya Road, Woodlands Shopping Centre Lusaka. E-mail: care@zamnet.zm